

MOTHER GOOSE AND THE PARODISTS

BY FREDERICK HALL

THE first essential of any verse to be parodied is that it be familiar; so, not unnaturally, the favorite mine from which the parodist exhumes his ore is the poetic product of that sainted though mythical "Mother Goose," whose personality has indeed evaporated under the fierce light turned upon it by the higher critics, but whose jingles live on—

Enduring as a mother's love,
Fresh as a baby's laughter.

Mary and her little lamb are, properly, not of her family,—they are too modern and their pedigree too well known,—but in the minds of children they belong to Mother Goose, and children's hands have so securely pedestaled them among the immortals that few readers of English could fail to recognize the inspiration of such a verse as:

Mary had a little lamb,
He was her steady beau,
And everywhere that Mary went,
The lamb put up the dough.

Or:

Mary had a little waist,
Where waists were meant to grow,
And everywhere the fashions went
Her waist was sure to go.

More liberties with the original are taken in the following examples from a recent parody contest:

Mary had a little lamb,
She put it on the shelf,
And every time it wagged its tail
It spanked its little self.

And:

I've always heard that fleas were black,
But I don't think it's so;
For Mary had a little lamb
Whose "fleas" were white as snow.

The next item is both the best and the worst of the bucolic series; for, while it contains a not too obtrusive moral, its humor is largely in the sudden jolt, which gives one quite the sensation of sitting down in an absent chair:

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow,
It followed her to Pittsburgh—
And now just look at it!

Speaking of morals, the parodists have a fetching way of so enshrining them as to make them unforgettable, as in this quatrain on "Church Air":

Some like it hot,
Some like it cold,
Some like it in the church,
Seven days old!

Or, by way of companion piece:

Storage eggs hot,
Storage eggs cold,
Storage eggs in the pot,
Two years old!

The Mother Goose parodies have served as missiles for muckrakers, as witness the cynical observation that:

Little silver dollars,
Little bills of green,
Keep the politician
From the soup tureen.

Of quite different character and certainly of less democratic appeal is the parody credited to the Popular Science Monthly:

Infinitesimal particles of saline humective fluidity,
Minute corpuscles of non-adhering inorganic matter,
Conjointly cause to exist the immeasurable expanse of aqueous sections,
And the resplendent superficial area of dry solidity.

Most writers of parody, and especially of Mother Goose parody, must be content, however quotable their verses, to be themselves forgotten. Yet one of them, J. W. Foley, has written parody sufficient in quality and volume to have attached his name securely to some of it.

One of his most charming characteristics is timeliness. His verses are up-to-the-minute, sometimes even ahead-of-the-minute, as:

Jack be nimble,
Jack be quick,
Jack flew over
The At-lan-tic.

Or:

Jack Spratt could eat no fat,
His wife could eat no leans,
Because they joined a Raw Food Club,
Where all the grub was greens.

Or:

Jack and Jill went up the hill,
Like dutiful son and daughter;
Now Jack has typhoid, Jill is ill—
They didn't boil the water.

But timeliness is not his only virtue. He has the true poet's insight into the human heart and its frailties:

Taffy was a plumber,
Taffy's price was steep,
Taffy came to our house
And he went fast asleep;
I went to Taffy's house
And paid him thirty bones,
For soldering a pipe joint
In a house my landlord owns.

Or take this pathetic lyric:

If all the States were going dry,
And all the teas were pink,
And all the speers were sewing bees,
'Twould drive a man to drink.

Or consider this war ballad:

Fe, fi, fo—Joy!
I smell the blood of a Rah-Rah Boy.
Be he alive or be he dead
Doesn't matter—Yale's ahead!!!

It is perhaps Mr. Foley to whom we owe this gem, entitled "The First Magnitude":

Twinkle, twinkle, little star!
How I wonder if you are,
Up above the footlights' sheen,
Forty-nine or seventeen!

But then it may not have been he. The tag is bound to wear off when such verse begins to run loose in the newspapers. Our gratitude to the parodists we must pay chiefly in bulk to a class; but they owe a large debt of individual gratitude to the memory of Mother Goose.

DOING USELESS THINGS

I RECALL the reproduction of what is called a picture, said to have been made from the bodies of over four thousand beetles, by a barber in a little town in Pennsylvania. Think of the sheer waste of time in performing the foolish task, the months spent in collecting the insects, the days given to preparing the bodies, the weeks in mounting and arranging them into the pattern!

A carpenter of Los Angeles boasts of a chair made entirely of toothpicks. The little bits of wood are intertwined and glued together, and the effect, it must be admitted, is by no means displeasing; but the labor thus expended could have been put to far more valuable use. Instead of occupying itself patching together splinters to form a seat, this ingenious mind might have devised some new form of the chair. Compare the results of William Morris, the English poet, who produced the Morris chair, with this California squanderer of talent!

Then we have those persons who utilize odds and ends for the making of some mechanism, where the desired result might far better be attained by the purchase, in the beginning, of the essential materials. We read, for instance, of a resident of Halifax, Nova Scotia, who has built a complete locomotive out of nothing but cooking utensils and similar pieces to the number of two hundred and thirty-one. In the list of materials employed we find such interesting articles as egg toasters, stove lifters, fruit presses, table mats, and what not.

Over in Bohemia one John Bayer, after six years of labor, completed a clock, which, with the exception of the springs, consisted entirely of crystal.

The champion whittler is another type of the doer of useless things: not the man at the corner grocery who litters the floor with shavings as he idly peels down a bit of pine and discusses the shortcomings of the administration, but the man who professes to make articles by his skill and industry. In an eastern city is an old ship's carpenter who claims the title of champion whittler. Chains are his specialty, and he labors long and diligently, and it may be added pathetically, in the creation of trinkets and baubles carved from wood.

But it is not in the industrial world alone that we find folly of this kind. There is on record the English schoolboy who knew by heart the timetables of all the postroads in England. We find ever and anon the man who can say the alphabet and the Lord's prayer backward—the latter accomplishment, by the way, being formerly believed to be black magic.

There is the scholar who translated the New Testament back into Greek, although the version in use today throughout the world was translated from that language.

The mathematical calculator is another waster of time,—the man who can tell how many times all the dollar bills in existence, if placed end to end, would pass round the earth, the man who can tell how many beans there are in a bottle of a certain capacity, and so on. —William T. Walsh

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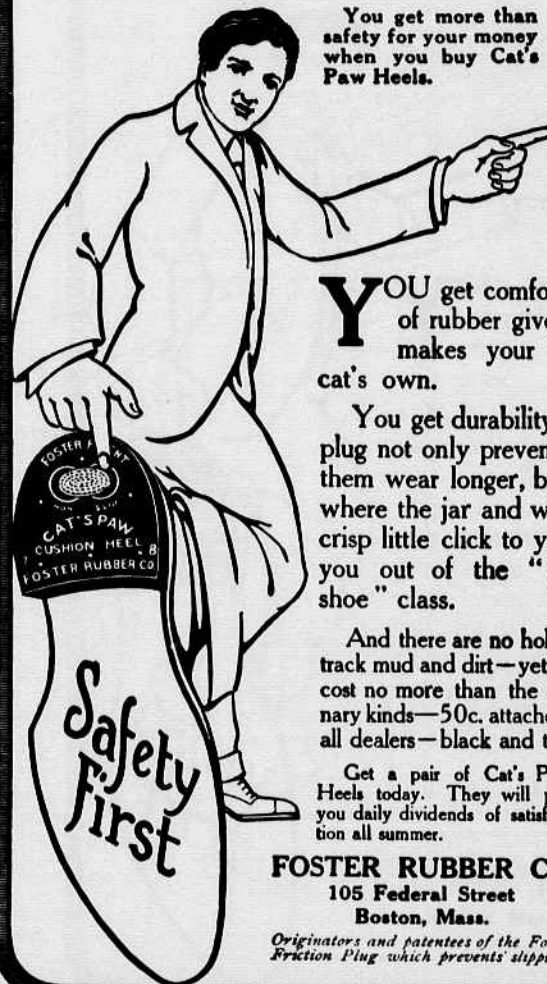
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